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## RECREATION DEVELOPMENTS IN CHICAGO PARKS

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The large measure of national attention which has been directed toward Chicago's parks during the last half-dozen years testifies to the significance of the new type which that city has recently developed. The Chicago small park recreation centers, for which thus far about \$10,000,000 have been spent or voted, have established a new standard in public provision for recreation. They register the high-water mark in two tides which have been rising during the last two decades—the playground movement and the movement to secure from city parks not only landscape beauty, but a larger human service. They stand for the growing recognition that recreation facilities for the whole family and all the members of the community are just as much needed as the children's playgrounds which are now accepted necessities.

Although the small park recreation centers had already become widely known, their fame was most effectively spread throughout the country in 1907 by the first convention of the Playground Association of America. This gathering was held in Chicago to enable the delegates to observe at first hand the operation of the recreation centers. President Roosevelt in February of that year wrote a letter urging all of our larger municipalities to send representatives to gain the inspiration of the convention and "to see the magnificent system that Chicago has erected in its South Park section, one of the most notable civic achievements of any American city." Among the two hundred delegates were a large number who had been appointed by the mayors of their respective cities. Such official representatives, on returning from the convention, submitted reports in which prominent place was given to descriptions and photographs of Chicago's South Park recreation centers. Through these reports, and the information and enthusiasm disseminated by all who attended the convention, as well as through the constant stream of visitors from all parts of the country, the Chicago facilities for play and recreation may be said to have contributed in no small degree to the

rapid progress of the recreation movement throughout America during the last three years.

The principal purpose of this article, in line with the general title of this volume, is to describe these unique recreation facilities and the extent to which they have been provided for the whole city and to suggest something of their significance. It is also proposed to outline in a few words the city's earlier park history, tell briefly of the movement for an outer parkway belt, and touch upon two recent developments having special recreational interest—the play festivals which bring together young and old of all nationalities, and the Saturday afternoon walks which are leading many people of the city center to a more intimate appreciation of the beautiful regions surrounding Chicago, especially those included in the proposed outer parkway belt of meadow and woodland.

Chicago had been an incorporated city but two years when, in 1839, the first park was established. It occupied the half-block on the lake front where the public library now stands and was named Dearborn Park. From 1839 to 1869 extension was gradual. Seven more were established, among them Union Park, given to the city in 1854, which became the city's principal park. Thirty-four small pieces of land, mostly at street intersections, were added as "beauty spots" before 1870. A tract of land along the lake shore on the north side was urged as a park site in 1860. Public funds were appropriated to improve it in 1864 and the name "Lincoln" was given to it in 1865.

The establishment of Lincoln Park, however, should be considered as part of a movement which made 1869 a memorable year in Chicago's park history. This movement, which crystallized that year in legislation, was for a chain of parks and connecting boulevards starting at Lincoln Park and including Humboldt, Garfield, Douglas, Washington and Jackson parks. These large parks, varying in size from 182 to 542 acres, put Chicago well toward the front among American cities, so that in 1880 it ranked second in park area.

The city's contentment with this proud showing lulled it to comparative inactivity, so far as park extension was concerned. From 1880 to 1903 population increased 272.40 per cent., while park area increased only 58.70 per cent. Chicago then had fallen to seventh among American cities in respect to total park area; but

measured by the test of number of inhabitants to each acre of park space, it had dropped to nineteenth place.

The growth of population, moreover, involved such crowding in the "river wards" that large numbers of people were massed in regions little served by the chain of large parks. Nearly a million people lived more than a mile from any one of them in 1904. Eleven wards, with a population of 425,000, contained 1814 acres of park space—234 people to the acre. The remaining twenty-three wards, with a population of over a million, contained only 228 acres—4720 people to each acre of park space.

As this condition became more and more acute, the great need for children's playgrounds was increasingly urged by those in a position to know the effects of the congestion upon the child life of the community. The residents of social settlements could count the human cost, as few others could, of the failure to provide opportunities for wholesome play. They could not rest without doing something, however little, to meet the problem. Accordingly, in 1893, the first playground was opened by Hull House on land given by Mr. William Kent.<sup>1</sup> Within the next few years Northwestern University Settlement, the University of Chicago Settlement and Chicago Commons opened small playgrounds for the children of their neighborhoods. In 1897 the first school playground was opened in the yard of the Washington school by the West Side district of the Associated Charities.

The beginnings of the playground movement in Chicago were soon followed by municipal action. In 1898 the first public funds, \$1000, were appropriated by the city council. Individuals subscribed \$750 additional. Six schoolyards, their use granted by the Board of Education, were maintained as equipped and supervised playgrounds under the direction of the Vacation School Committee of the Women's Clubs.

The next step was the organization, in 1899, of the Special Park Commission. This came as the result of a resolution passed by the city council at the suggestion of the Municipal Science Club, a group of men which included several social settlement residents. The commission was composed partly of aldermen and partly of

<sup>1</sup>Viewing the movement for public recreation in its large significance, the fact is interesting that the donor of the first children's playground in Chicago is also the donor of a national park—the Muir Woods, near San Francisco.

private citizens. Upon it have served members of the older park commissions created by the legislation of 1869.

To understand the park development of the past decade, it is necessary to make clear the powers and limitations of these older park commissions. As a result of the legislation of 1869, the South, West, and Lincoln Park commissions came into being. Each serves one of the three "sides" of Chicago, the divisions naturally made by the Chicago River and its north and south branches.<sup>2</sup> The South Park Commission consists of five members appointed by the judges of the circuit court; the West and Lincoln Park commissions each consist of seven members appointed by the governor with consent of the state senate. Each commission has power independently of the municipal government to issue bonds not to exceed five per cent. of the assessed valuation of the property in its territory, and also to levy taxes on this property. Under the legislation governing them, they had no authority to establish and maintain playgrounds.

The Special Park Commission, securing its funds from the general corporate funds of the city, undertook at once to establish small playgrounds in the crowded districts. Five were at once started and the system has grown to include fourteen, with two bathing beaches on the Lake Michigan shore. To this commission were turned over the small playgrounds originally conducted by the social settlements.

The work of the Special Park Commission has involved more than the establishment and maintenance of small playgrounds. It made a comprehensive study and report<sup>3</sup> of the park and playground needs of the city, including the desirability of securing an outer parkway system.

Finding that adequate funds were not available for it to meet the urgent need for small parks and playgrounds in the congested districts, it started a movement to secure an enlargement of the powers of the older park commissions. To help these commissions the Special Park Commission made a study of conditions and recommended sites for small parks in each of the three sections of the city.

Following out this movement the three older commissions

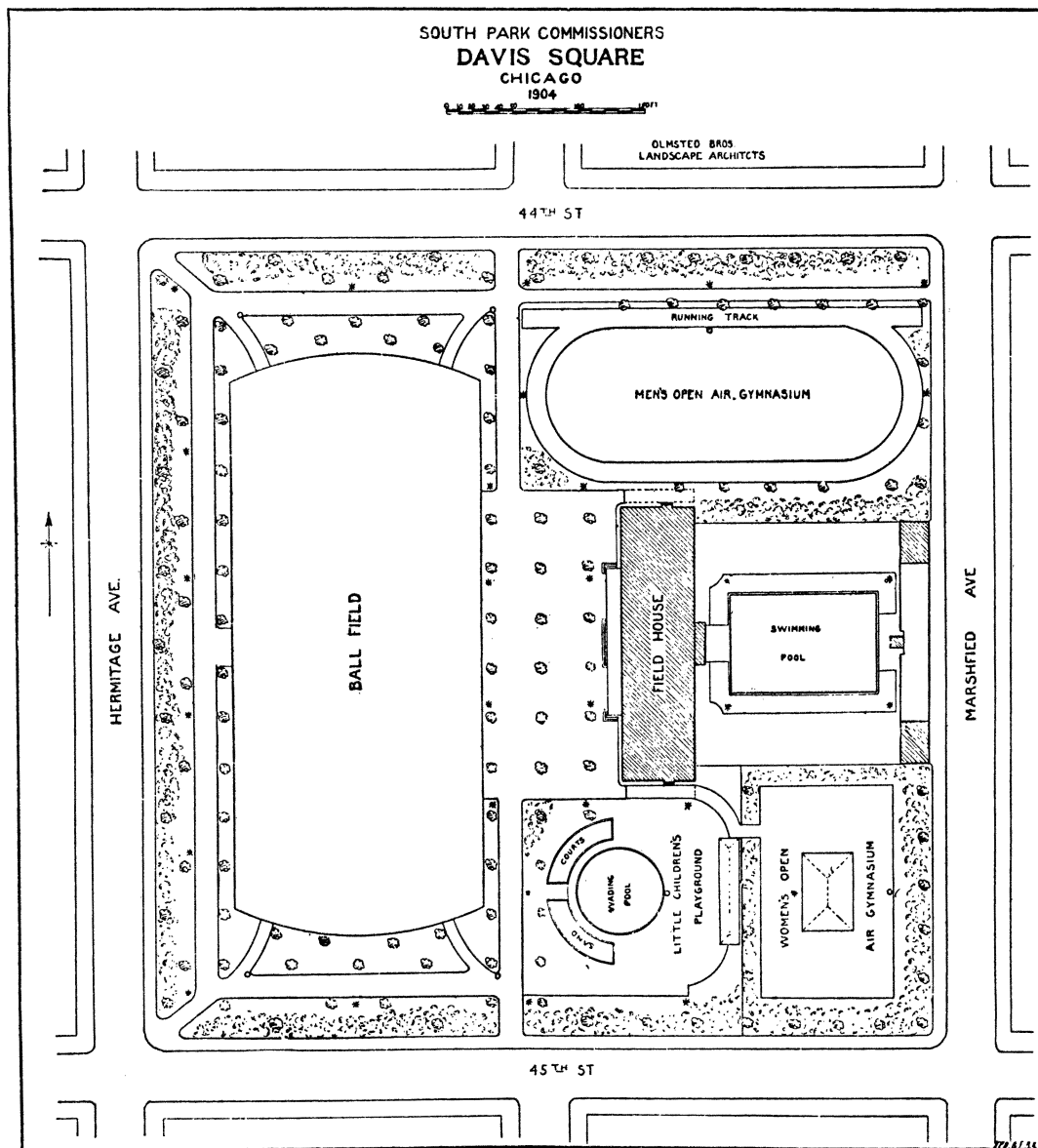
<sup>2</sup>This is not wholly correct, as a few small outlying areas are under the control of minor commissions organized under the same statutes.

<sup>3</sup>Metropolitan Park Report, 1904.

secured the passage by the legislature of acts authorizing them to issue bonds for small parks. In each case the necessary referendum vote of the people has been overwhelmingly favorable. The funds which have thus far been secured and spent or set aside for recreation centers amount to \$7,700,000 (out of \$9,500,000 total bond issues) for the South Park Commission; \$1,000,000 for the West Park Commission, and \$750,000 for the Lincoln Park Commission. In noting the much greater proportionate amount secured by the South Park Commission, it should be borne in mind that in its territory lies the downtown district, the park funds from which, therefore, go entirely to the park system of the South Side. The value of the property, therefore, against which this commission has authority to issue bonds and levy taxes far exceeds the combined value of the property over which the West and Lincoln Park commissions have similar powers.

The sums indicated have created Chicago's recreation centers. There are now in operation ten under the South Park Commission, three under the West Park Commission and one under the Lincoln Park Commission. There have been provided the following sites not yet completely improved as recreation centers: nine under the South Park Commission, and two under the Lincoln Park Commission, which has also used some of its money for a playground having no field house. Of the nine South Park Commission sites two are about to be improved as recreation centers at a cost of \$500,000 each. The improvement of the other seven sites must await the securing of further funds from bond issues. Another bond issue of \$1,000,000 by the West Park Commission has been authorized by the legislature and will be submitted to referendum vote in April, 1910. If this sum is secured, it will probably establish three more recreation centers on the West Side.

The great advance registered by this new type of play park over the ordinary playground is readily seen by comparing the recreation centers with the playgrounds conducted by the Special Park Commission, the latter being typical of the kind to be found in many cities throughout the country. The Special Park Commission playgrounds rank high among those of their type and are a very creditable achievement with little money. They average, however, less than an acre in size and are used only by children. Each is equipped with sand courts, swings, teeter boards, slides, giant



strides and similar facilities. There is a small frame shelter house and each has a man and a woman supervisor. Except for skating in winter the playgrounds are in use only through the summer months, although recently two or three have been provided with indoor gymnasiums for winter use. The annual maintenance expense for each averages less than \$4000. They render, however, very great service to the community, the attendance in 1908, for example, being 2,089,336.

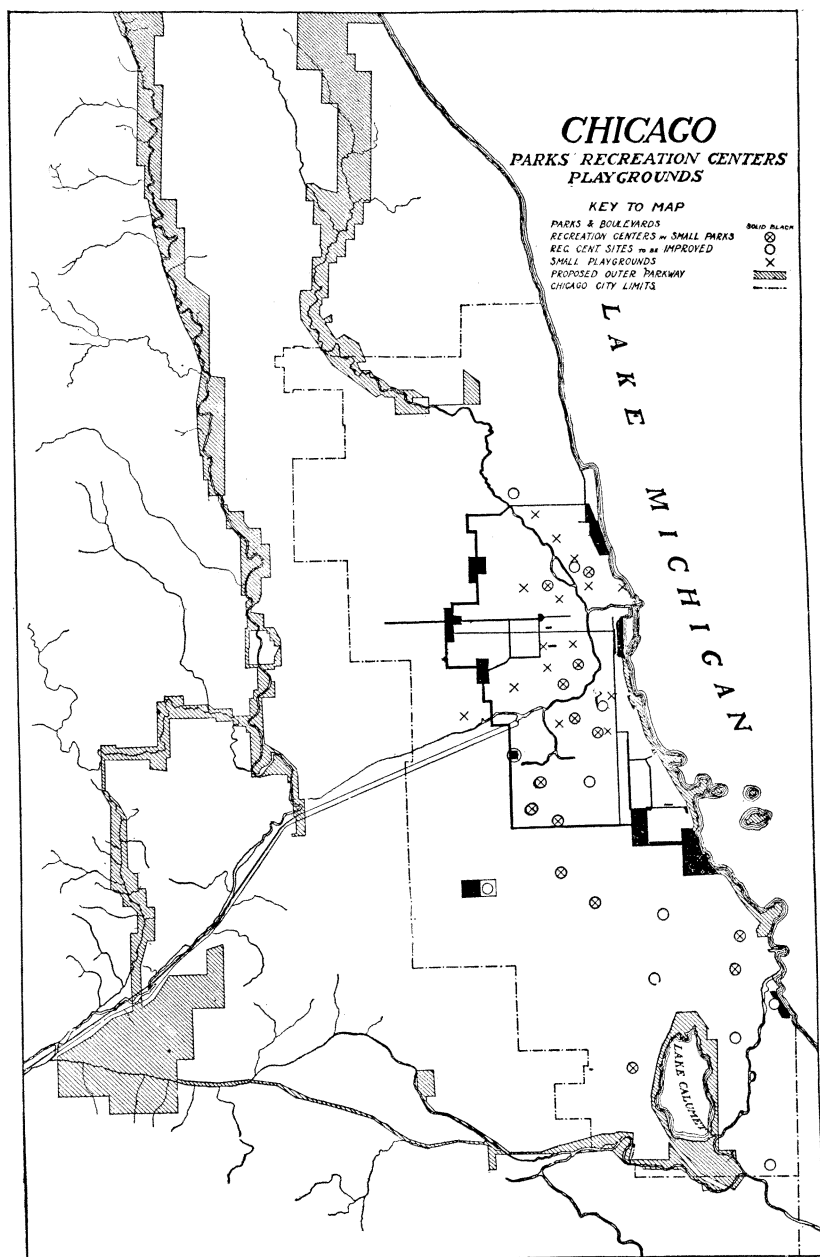
The recreation centers, on the other hand, provide facilities not only for children, but for young people and adults as well, and render service the year round. The grounds vary in extent from two to sixty acres, the average being about ten acres, and have trees, shrubs and lawns. The larger ones have lagoons for boating.

The outdoor facilities include a play field for baseball, football and other games, which is flooded in the winter for skating; a children's playground with swings, teeter boards, slides, giant strides, wading pools and sand courts over which awnings may be stretched, and around which are benches for the mothers who come to watch their children at play, sometimes bringing such work as they can take from their homes. There is an outdoor gymnasium for women and girls over ten years of age, and another for men and boys over ten years of age. A fine outdoor swimming pool is in use from spring until fall. It is surrounded by electric lights, so that it can be used until late in the evening, and two days each week are reserved for women and girls. It also has sand courts, so that the bathers can have some of the pleasures of a beach.

Recreation buildings house the indoor facilities. These consist of two indoor gymnasiums, one for men and boys and the other for women and girls; lockers, shower and plunge baths, refectory, reading room, small club rooms and assembly halls for the entertainments, dances, meetings and social gatherings of the people. The average cost of maintaining each recreation center is \$30,000 a year.

No charge is made for any of the service, except in the refectory, where the food is supplied at cost. The refectories also serve as distributing stations for modified milk, supplied at low cost by the Milk Commission for the use of babies and invalids. There are no concessionaires in the whole system. The South Park Commission, moreover, conducts its own plant for manufacturing ice cream





and flavoring syrups, and operates laundries for the bathing suits and refectory tablecloths and napkins.

The fact that facilities are grouped, which in some communities are scattered, is worth noting. A public gymnasium, bathhouse, playground, and reading room if grouped in one "plant" not only save much administrative expense, but increase each other's usefulness.

Each recreation center is in charge of a well-educated social director—this being a recent advance step to insure and promote the best use and highest efficiency of the center. The staff includes two men instructors in charge of the men's and boys' indoor gymnasium and outdoor gymnasium, running track and ballfield; and two women instructors for the women's and girls' indoor and outdoor gymnasiums and the children's playground; attendants in the locker rooms, baths, refectory and swimming pool; and a force of janitors and laborers for the buildings and grounds. The Public Library Board supplies the books and attendant for the reading room.

The recreation buildings constructed by the South Park Commission are with one exception built of rough-finished concrete and roofed with green or red tile. One is built of brick, which is also the material used in the three recreation centers established by the West Park Commission, and the one on the north side established by the Lincoln Park Commission.

The use of the facilities would astonish the pessimists who doubt whether the people will take advantage of opportunities. The total attendance on the ten recreation centers on the South Side, for example, numbered 5,175,500 for the twelve months ending November 30, 1907, and this figure does not include visitors or onlookers, but only those who made actual use of the facilities. This was divided as follows: 279,455 in the indoor gymnasiums, 900,948 in the shower baths, 2,164,104 in the outdoor gymnasiums, 654,213 in the swimming pools, 135,978 at social gatherings and lectures in the assembly halls, 28,492 in the smaller clubrooms, 608,585 in the reading rooms and 403,725 customers at 5 cents or more each in the refectories. At one of the West Side recreation centers, located in the midst of a great Polish colony, the attendance on the swimming pool has been as much as 6000 on a single day.

These statistics of attendance, however, are a poor criterion of success and efficiency in playground work. This has been pointed

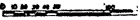
out repeatedly by Mr. E. B. DeGroot, general director of field houses and playgrounds of the South Park Commission, a man who began his playground experience in the days of the six little schoolyards with their meager equipment, and who now is doing for Chicago work of inestimable value through his expert administration of the manifold service the South Side recreation centers render to the people. He emphasizes the quality of that service—its value not merely in keeping children and older people out of worse things they might be doing, but as a factor of high efficiency in promoting health, good character and public-spirited citizenship. He inspires his subordinates with the same spirit, and their *esprit de corps* testifies to the effectiveness with which he makes his high ideals felt in the daily routine. He has well said in one of his reports, "The best and most patriotic citizenship comes not as a result of compelling obedience to and respect for laws, but as a result of the practice of right ethical relations with each other, no matter what races, nationalities or classes are involved. This is the spirit of the playgrounds."

While the South Side recreation centers have all been located in neighborhoods which greatly needed their service, those established on the West and North sides have been placed in some of the most crowded districts of Chicago. For instance, one of the West Side recreation centers, eight acres in area, occupies two city blocks on which formerly 165 houses were crowded on 100 building lots.

The significance of the recreation centers is difficult to overestimate. They show most vividly the rapidity with which social progress can move. A decade ago, when Mr. George A. Parker, of Hartford, Conn., made an investigation of the lack of parks in industrial communities and described in his report his ideal of the socialized park, the description seemed almost Utopian. Yet in less than a decade it became a prophecy fulfilled in Chicago in a finer way than even he dared dream. The development of to-day, with its millions invested in recreation centers and playgrounds which cost annually about \$500,000 to maintain, is little short of marvelous when one remembers the struggle required to secure the first appropriation of \$1000 from public funds eleven years ago.

The inception of Chicago's recreation enterprise has some aspects of peculiar significance. The South Park Commission, which

SOUTH PARK  
SHERMAN  
CITY



LOOMIS

DRIVE

WALK

BALL FIELD

DRIVE

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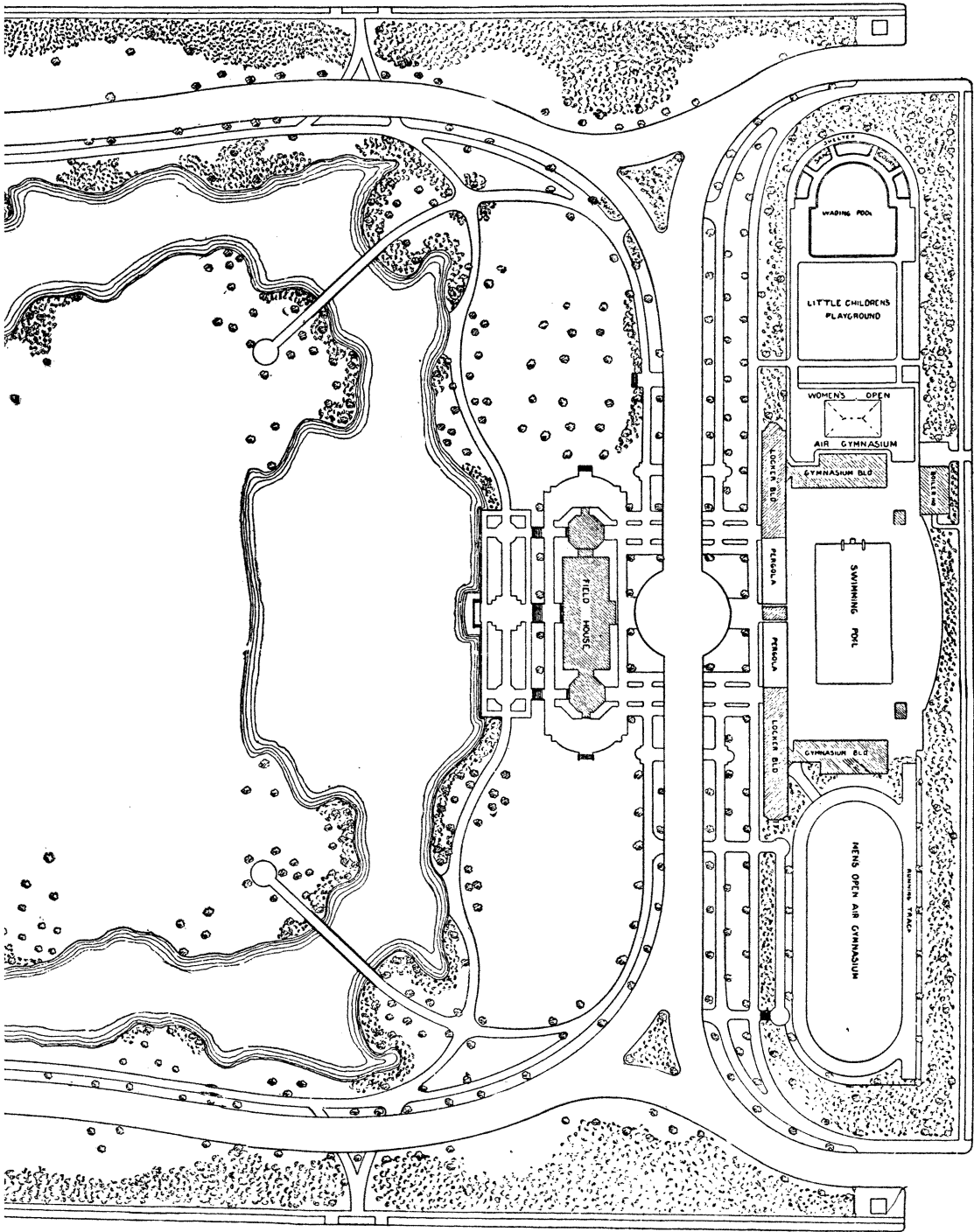
BOULEVARD

BOAT HOUSE

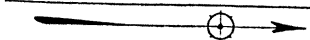
ARK COMMISSIONERS  
MAN PARK  
CHICAGO  
1904

OLMSTED BROS.  
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

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took the lead, had as president Mr. Henry G. Foreman, and as superintendent, Mr. J. Frank Foster, who still serve in these capacities. To their vision and practical foresight are due the recreation center scheme, in the working out of which the Olmsted Brothers and Mr. Daniel H. Burnham contributed the landscape and architectural effects. From the sociological point of view, however, especial significance attaches to the fact that Mr. Foreman held not only the presidency of the South Park Commission, but also the presidency of the Board of Cook County Commissioners. Under his authority in the latter capacity were the county hospital, jail, poor infirmary and hospital for the insane. His observation of the human wreckage which floats into these corrective and curative institutions led him to consider what could be accomplished through the parks to catch the tide at its source. The planning out of the recreation centers shows plainly the mark of this thought and of intimate observation of the needs of dwellers where city and industrial conditions bear down the hardest.

For some of the social and recreative lines the work of the social settlements undoubtedly afforded in some degree a prototype. If the social settlements contributed anything to the development of this more democratic provision of neighborhood centers, they may in that degree glory in the success of losing part of their life to find it again in the socialized park. The social settlement spirit could scarcely be expressed more finely than by the service which a group of cultivated people might render if they should naturally take up their residence near one of these recreation centers and join with their neighbors in making it count most effectively for better community life. However democratic may be the spirit of a settlement, the fact remains that its facilities are provided by one part of the community for another.

The recreation center belongs to all the people. This was emphasized by President Foreman upon the dedicatory occasions, when he repeatedly declared that every one pays taxes, even if by the humble way of rent and grocery bills. An address by President B. A. Eckhart, of the West Park Commission, at the dedication of its Park No. 1, also indicates the fine spirit with which these recreation centers were conceived. He said, "In these playgrounds and in their work lie the beginnings of social redemption of the people in large cities. They furnish the spectacle of a 'city saving

itself,' of the people of a great city finding nature and God by finding their neighbors and themselves."

In the space of this article it is possible to discuss only fragmentarily the significance of the service rendered by the recreation centers. Their provision of play opportunity for children requires no words of argument; this need throughout the country is now well recognized. The essential fact in Chicago's system is that it affords a continuity of facilities beyond those which appeal only to children. The individual's recreative need is at no age left in the lurch. It is significant that in our juvenile courts a large proportion of the delinquents received are between the ages of 14 and 16, the very period when the small playground begins to lose its grip and appeal. How efficiently the recreation centers are dealing with this problem of delinquency is shown by the results of an investigation financed by the Russell Sage Foundation and conducted by the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy.<sup>4</sup> In neighborhoods where recreation centers were established the cases of delinquency in the Chicago Juvenile Court decreased on the average 28 per cent.

The harshness with which modern city and industrial conditions repress youth, and the consequences of this, have been discussed with rare understanding and insight by Miss Jane Addams in her recent book, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*. The recreation centers may not go far in the solution of this broad problem, but they at least afford some provision for tiding over the critical period just after childhood. This is the age when boys and girls begin to have money of their own to spend on amusements. A glance at our smaller as well as larger cities will show the extent to which all sorts of cheap shows, dance halls and amusement places are being provided by those whose sole interest is commercial. That the facilities of the recreation centers serve in some degree as substitutes may be gathered from what has already been told in this article. One part of their service needs a little more explanation—the social halls.

If the street and alley and tiny backyard are inadequate for the play of the children, the small tenements with their clutter and wash-tubs and cooking odors are quite as inadequate for the social gatherings of young people and adults. The halls at low rental in the

<sup>4</sup>See "Charities and The Commons" (now "The Survey") for October 3, 1908.

crowded parts of a large city are almost invariably in connection with saloons. It is of the greatest significance, therefore, that the Chicago recreation centers provide halls for the free use of the people. If Mary Sullivan, or the South End Pleasure Club, or any neighborhood group or organization wishes to give an entertainment or dance, a beautiful hall is available with no charge for rent, heat, light, janitor service or the use of the piano. In some of them a most pleasing touch is added by the continuous provision of palms and other plants. So popular are these halls that application for an evening's use must be made well in advance. In them are held dances, stereopticon lectures, entertainments, concerts, banquets, wedding receptions, neighborhood improvement meetings, rehearsals of local dramatic and musical clubs, and many other gatherings except political and sectarian religious meetings. A beautiful loan collection of paintings from the Art Institute was exhibited for a week in each hall. And a recent development is a series of Sunday evening concerts arranged by the Women's Trade Union League. The music is of a high class and is often preceded by brief explanatory talks.

The effect of the recreation centers in the assimilation of immigrants is no small part of their value to Chicago. They show a kindlier aspect of government than that which has often been most apparent to the immigrant. Through play and social recreation acquaintance among the people of various nationalities may be most easily encouraged. One basketball team was composed of an Italian, a Russian Jew, a Frenchman, a Swede and an Irishman. To develop team play in such a group is symbolical of a neighborly and co-operative spirit which the recreation centers may do much to promote.

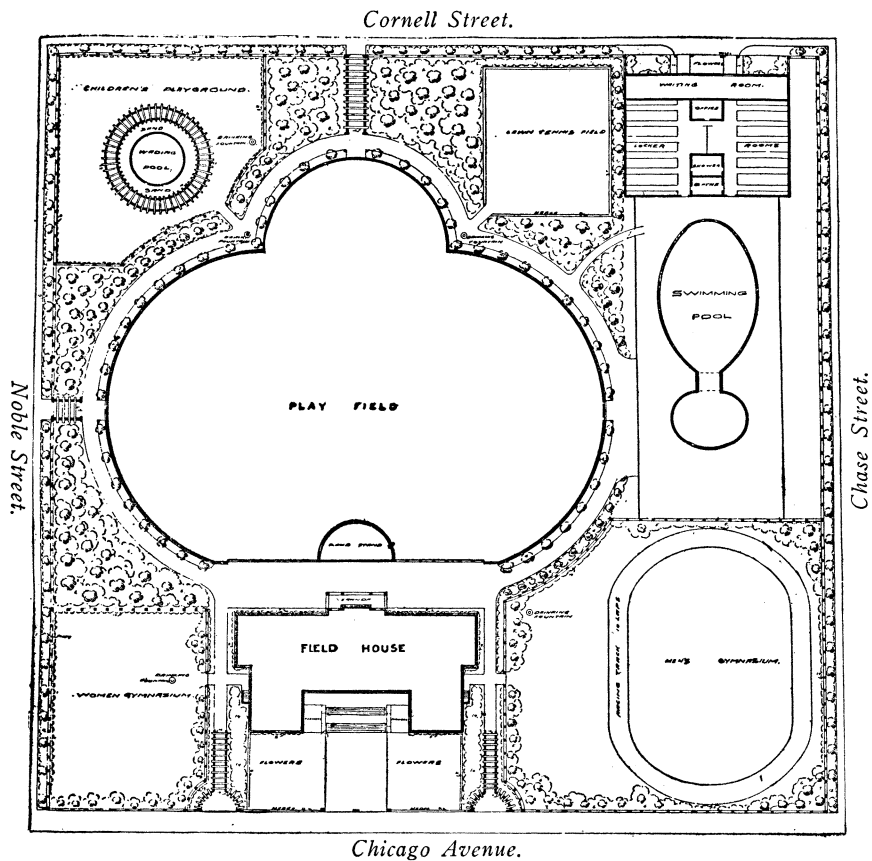
About the same time that the recreation center movement started Chicago began to feel the need of an outer parkway. The movement crystallized in 1903 when the Cook County Commissioners adopted a resolution establishing an Outer Belt Park Commission, composed of representatives of all the park commissions and of the city and county authorities. Still more definite shape was given the scheme in 1904, when the Metropolitan Park Report, prepared by Mr. Dwight H. Perkins, of the Special Park Commission, suggested certain areas totaling 37,000 acres. The regions include land on both sides of the north branch of the Chicago River, the Desplaines river valley, the Skokee marches north of the city, a large tract of



PARK NO. 1.

WEST CHICAGO PARK COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE.

Scale 1.48" to 1'.



hilly wooded ground southwest of the city, and some land around the edges of Lake Calumet. Altogether, the proposed areas form a continuous belt around the city.

The plan was advanced with all the assurance gained from the precedent of Boston's great outer parkway achievement, and the conservative estimate of traction engineers that by 1950 Chicago's population would be in the neighborhood of 10,000,000.

In November, 1905, a referendum vote was held on the outer park proposition. Although the result was 86,768 affirmative votes to 59,028 negative, it was found that under the law the proposition must receive a majority of all votes cast at the election. It therefore, failed by a few thousand votes. Another law has been passed under which a majority of the votes on the question itself will be sufficient. As the result of conferences recently held it is expected that the outer parkway scheme will again be submitted to the voters at the election in November, 1910.

An indication of the recreative use of these beautiful regions near Chicago is afforded by the success of a series of Saturday afternoon walks, organized in 1908, by a group of out-of-doors enthusiasts. The "hikers' club," as it is colloquially called, includes 1,500 people—many of whom are engaged in downtown office work—who have gone upon one or more walks. In the spring and fall the "hikers" number about 140 on an average walk; in winter as many as fifty. The organization consists of a self-appointed committee. Commutation tickets are used to keep the expense low, and the crowd starts off on an early afternoon suburban train, walks from four to eight miles, usually in regions proposed for the outer parkway, and returns on a late afternoon train. A charge slightly in excess of the transportation is made to pay for the circulars announcing the details of each series of walks.

The outer parkway is, of course, one of the features of the elaborate city plan for Chicago, prepared by Mr. Daniel H. Burnham, under the auspices of the Commercial Club, and now being considered by an official commission appointed by the mayor. The Burnham plan, however, suggests for outer parkway purposes more than double the area proposed in the original scheme. The plan also gives prominent place to another park development which should be mentioned among the achievements of recent years—the enlargement and improvement of Grant Park on the lake front adjoining the business

sections. It is suggested as the center for a group of three buildings devoted to science, art and literature.

Playgrounds, recreation centers and larger parks are, after all, but vehicles for the better expression of the people's recreative spirit. To promote this, and give some glimpse of its many forms in physical activity and of its meaning for a city, a great play festival is annually held by the Playground Association of Chicago, a voluntary organization of people interested in extending the playgrounds and recreation centers, in promoting their efficiency and in stimulating the play and recreative spirit. So successful have these occasions been that many small neighborhood play festivals are now held each year in the playgrounds and recreation centers.

The large festival in 1909 brought together no less than 3,100 participants and three crowds of onlookers for the morning, afternoon and evening sessions, aggregating a day's attendance of over 30,000, including many visitors from other cities.<sup>5</sup> All ages and nationalities are represented among the participants. Games of childhood, activities of the playgrounds and schools, athletics, and a great variety of peasant games and national and folk dances are shown. The latter are performed in many cases by people from the immigrant population of Chicago, some of whom have so recently arrived that they speak no English. A great variety of peasant costumes adds picturesqueness to the scene, which is usually in an open meadow of a larger park. The spirit which the Playground Association has sought to foster among all who participate is one of co-operation through each nationality and period of life, from childhood to maturity, contributing what it can to the richness of American play. The day is prophetic of the social spirit that will one day permeate the commingled nationalities and classes, which, in the modern industrial city, now crowd and jostle each other. We have only begun to appreciate what provision for public recreation may contribute to the greater happiness of our community life.

<sup>5</sup>For descriptive articles, illustrated, on the Chicago Play Festivals, see "The Survey," November 6, 1909, "Charities and The Commons," August 1, 1908, and August 3, 1907.